RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

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EFFECTS OF URBAN ABORIGINAL RESIDENTIAL MOBILITY

Introduction

Urban residential mobility is the movement of individuals or households within the same urban area.

Aboriginal people living in urban areas move more frequently than non-Aboriginal people do. For example, in 1991, the urban Aboriginal mobility rate was 1.8 times higher than the rate among non-Aboriginal people.

Past research has indicated that while there are many reasons why Aboriginal people move so frequently, housing seems to be almost always important. Aboriginal people move in search of more affordable, suitable and adequate housing. They also move because of family reasons, for example, household size changes, conflict or breakdown; and because they are often looking for better access to community services or employment opportunities.

So, what are the concerns about urban Aboriginal mobility?

High mobility among urban Aboriginal people can affect social service agencies that provide services for Aboriginal people, as well as their clients.

Objectives of the research

This research explored the effects of urban Aboriginal residential mobility on agencies that provide social services to Aboriginal people, and their clients, in two Canadian cities where proportions of Aboriginal people are high—Regina, Saskatchewan and Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Research questions

The researchers asked agency personnel and their Aboriginal clients the following four questions:

Question # 1:
What impact does the high mobility rate among the urban Aboriginal population groups have upon their access to service?

Question # 2:
What is the impact of mobility on agencies providing services?

Question # 3
Do Aboriginal individuals and families who receive services and agencies that provide services see residential mobility as a problem? If so, what are the solutions?

Question # 4
What measures have service organizations taken, and what would they like to undertake in the provision of services to a high- residential- mobility client group?

Methodology

The methodology for this research consisted of the following:

- a scan of existing literature and research on residential mobility;
- a telephone survey with services providers in Regina (6) and Winnipeg (15);
- aboriginal agencies interviewed their clients in Regina (39) and Winnipeg (30); and
- two focus groups with Aboriginal clients: one in Regina with 21 Aboriginal clients; the other in Winnipeg with 20. A total of 41 Aboriginal clients participated in the two cities.

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The survey instrument

The design of the survey instrument used for this research and the analysis of the survey data were based on a number of reports from Statistics Canada, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation and the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs.

The research sample

The social service agencies involved in the research were identified through existing networks, and were referred by other agencies. The participants for the focus groups, surveys and interviews were identified by various social service agencies operating in each Census Metropolitan Area (CMA) of Regina and Winnipeg. The samples for the surveys were, therefore, non-random.

Characteristics of the Aboriginal respondents

Aboriginal agencies interviewed their clients regarding their level of education—45 per cent of respondents in both cities had some high school education, 17 per cent had less than a grade 9 education and 13 per cent had a high school diploma.

Other characteristics of the Aboriginal interview respondents suggest that different populations were being sampled in Winnipeg as compared to Regina. For example:

- While 85 per cent of the respondents in Regina were employed, 47 per cent of the respondents in Winnipeg were receiving some form of social assistance as the major source of their household income.
- Whereas 69 per cent of the respondents in Regina were born in a city, only 30 per cent of respondents in Winnipeg were born in a city.
- Seventy per cent of respondents in Regina, as compared to only 57 per cent in Winnipeg, spent more than 30 per cent of their household income on housing and utilities.

The results

Given the small number of Aboriginal respondents and the non-random nature of the sample, the research results are not representative of the total Aboriginal population in either Regina or Winnipeg. However, they provide a good indication of the effects of urban Aboriginal residential mobility on agencies that provide social services to Aboriginal people, as well as their clients. The following were the responses to the four research questions:

Question # 1:

What impact does the high mobility rate among the urban Aboriginal population groups have upon their access to service?

Past research has indicated that high mobility can limit access to services when transportation becomes a barrier, and that this can affect the continuity of certain services, such as education and health.

Survey participants were asked if their children had been affected by frequent moves. Their responses ranged from saying that their children had received better services, to saying that their children had had negative experiences, such as having been in contact with gang activity and an unsafe neighborhood, to saying that their children had encountered difficulties with transitions to new schools and neighbourhood environments. However, the overwhelming majority of respondents—89 per cent in Regina and 80 per cent in Winnipeg—said that their children had not been affected by their frequent moves.

Survey and focus group participants were also asked if they felt that moving had had an impact on their ability to access the needed or wanted services. Sixty-six per cent in Regina and 67 per cent in Winnipeg said no. Those who said yes, cited a number of impacts, including the following:

- people may feel removed from the services they need and, therefore, have to seek out new services;
- access to transportation is restricted until people become oriented to the new area and bus routes and schedules; and
- people who have literacy problems can be affected in the search for services.

Question # 2

What is the impact of mobility on agencies providing services?

High mobility can have many negative effects for service agencies. These include, difficulties in tracking their clients, estimating current and future demand for the services they provide, and preparing appropriate policies, business plans and budgets.

High mobility can often remove Aboriginal clients from the agencies' service catchment areas. This can affect the agencies' ability to deliver services and their cost efficiency in service provision. It can also minimize the quality of the services, and prevent the maintenance of a continuum of care.

High mobility can also result in changing needs for services, as the number of clients can increase or decrease, and this can result in fluctuating budgets. Community agencies delivering education, health, as well as family, social and community services can also find it hard to maintain adequate service delivery.

Urban Aboriginal mobility can also impair social service agencies' ability to maintain contact with their clients. It can increase the agencies' paperwork and need for referrals, and create difficulties for their personnel as they have to adjust frequently to fluctuating numbers of clients. High mobility can also threaten some social service agencies with closure and add costs for housing agencies, which might have to spend more to advertise and prepare dwelling units for new tenants more often.

Question # 3

Do Aboriginal individuals and families who receive services and agencies that provide services see residential mobility as a problem? If so, what are the solutions?

A great disparity in the results of this research was the difference between what social service agencies felt about mobility and what Aboriginal individuals or families felt about it. Agencies largely indicated that mobility was an issue with negative impacts. On the other hand, Aboriginal individuals or families were less likely to see mobility as a problem, and more likely to see the need for adequate and affordable housing as the major issue, with mobility being a symptom of the lack of appropriate housing.

Depending on whether they were participating in interviews or focus groups, Aboriginal individuals and families who were receiving social services were split on whether residential mobility is a problem. Two thirds of the interview respondents did not see residential mobility as a problem, while at least half of the participants in the focus groups saw it as a problem.

The results of this research also indicate that high mobility can prevent Aboriginal individuals or families from establishing the necessary community or neighborhood relationships and networks. This, in turn, can affect their sense of security in their surroundings, and prevent them from finding out about the services available to them.

Aboriginal survey participants were asked about what they would need in their home or community to make them stay in the same home for 5-7 years. They responded that they would need affordable and adequate housing, increased income and assistance in securing loans, a safer and more stable neighborhood, access to grocery and laundry services, counselling services and personal development to address addictions, and employment to sustain a home.

Question # 4

What measures have service organizations taken and what would they like to undertake in the provision of services to a high-residential- mobility client group?

Despite the differing views about mobility, many of the solutions offered by Aboriginal clients and social service agencies' personnel mirrored each other. Recommended solutions include options for transportation; the provision of a clearinghouse or client registry; and access to a stable, fixed postal mailbox and voice mail. It was also suggested that a system to distribute information to clients and help them maintain contact with all agencies providing services be established. The Aboriginal Welcome Wagon, or similar approaches to helping people orient themselves within the urban environment were cited as examples of ways to assist Aboriginal people who experience high mobility.

A further recommendation was the use of an advocate for Aboriginal individuals or families to help them navigate the programs and services available and to act as a liaison between individuals and landlords or agencies.

Also identified as solutions were programs that can encourage stability for Aboriginal individuals and families. These programs should be designed to reduce potential family conflict, increase opportunities for employment and training and career development, and address the needs of Aboriginal youth.

Aboriginal respondents indicated that employment and training opportunities were necessary to improve economic circumstances, build a higher household income and increase access to housing and other services.

Aboriginal respondents and agencies' personnel suggested a number of housing related ideas to minimize high mobility. These included rent ceilings, the creation of more affordable housing, more low-income housing programs and rent-to-own incentive programs. They also suggested that housing agencies establish policies and property management practices to address the needs of Aboriginal tenants.

Next Steps

This research identified a number of issues for further investigation. The following are a few of the new leads recommended for continued research on other facets of urban residential mobility, access to services, and Aboriginal people and urban experiences.

- Examine the feasibility of and functioning of interagency networking with the goal of building and establishing linkages.
- Examine housing, home ownership and landlord operating policies.
- Examine how alternatives such as low- or no- down-payment plans could increase home ownership.
- Examine the effect of mobility on educational achievement.
- Conduct an environmental scan on the impact of housing shortages and the future housing needs of Aboriginal people.
- Examine the value of having a housing facilitator or advocate in both cities to help people become home owners and deal with issues such as the consequences of high mobility.
- Review the funding for housing programs given the expected increase in the urban Aboriginal population.
- Promote strategies for increasing Aboriginal participation in the labour force and educational institutions in an effort to increase income and reduce dependency on social assistance.

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Housing Research at CMHC

Under Part IX of the *National Housing Act*, the Government of Canada provides funds to CMHC to conduct research into the social, economic and technical aspects of housing and related fields, and to undertake the publishing and distribution of the results of this research.

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